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ABSTRACT

The Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) was noticed to consist primarily of pictures portraying characters in low-keyed, gloomy situations lacking in vibrance and physical activity. An alternative thematic apperception test was constructed by selecting pictures from the Family of Man photo essay collection. Pictures were selected to provide more positively-toned, active scenes. Eight undergraduate students told stories to 30 TAT pictures and 30 pictures from the new test, referred to as the Southern Mississippi Thematic Apperception Test (SM-TAT). Quantitative scoring of the SM-TAT stories revealed that the new test provided a balance of positively and negatively-toned stories and a variety of action and energy levels for the main character. The TAT, on the other hand, elicited predominantly negatively-toned and low energy stories. The results suggested that the SM-TAT was a feasible alternative to the TAT. (Author/MH)

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A Comprehensive Projective Alternative to the TAT

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An abbreviated version of this study was presented at the Southeastern Psychological Association Annual Meeting in New Orleans in 1979.

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Running Head: Alternative to the TAT

Abstract

Murray's TAT consists primarily of pictures portraying characters in low-keyed, gloomy situations lacking in vibrance and physical activity. An alternative thematic apperception test was constructed by selecting pictures from the Family of Man photo essay collection. Pictures were selected to provide more positively-toned, active scenes. Eight college students told stories to 30 TAT pictures and 30 pictures from the new test. Quantitative scoring of the stories revealed that the new test provided a balance of positive and negatively toned stories and a variety of action and energy levels for the main character. The TAT, on the other hand, elicited predominately negatively-toned and low energy stories. The results suggest that we were successful in constructing a more comprehensive alternative to the TAT.

A Comprehensive Projective Alternative to the TAT

Since its development in the 1930's, the Thematic Apperception Test (Murray, 1943) has demonstrated its value to the clinical psychologist as a diagnostic and personality assessment device in numerous studies (e.g., Dana, 1959; Eron, 1950; Ritter & Eron, 1952). The TAT continues as a very frequently used assessment technique in clinical settings. Sundberg's (1961) comprehensive survey of U. S. hospitals and clinics ranked the TAT as the fourth most frequently used psychological test.

Because of its frequent clinical application, the TAT has been subjected to many studies of reliability and validity. Another important aspect of the technique that has received attention is the actual stimulus content of the cards (Murstein, 1965). Focusing on stimulus properties is essential, since, like any projective technique, the TAT is valid only to the extent that its content is able to elicit a sample reflecting the full range of an individual's personality style. Criticisms leveled against the stimulus properties of the TAT pictures have implied the test artificially restricts the range of potential projective material. For one thing, a large majority of the pictures is sad and seems to exert a negative stimulus "pull" on story-telling. This has been found by Eron (1950), Eron, Terry, & Callahan (1950), and Goldfried & Zax (1965), among others. The cards are cast in dark shading tones and most scenes portray characters in low-keyed, gloomy situations. The few pictures presenting more positively toned situations are lacking in vibrance

and activity and depict characters who expend little physical energy. Consequently, the TAT is likely to elicit an overly somber, truncated sample of the subject's personality, which may lead clinicians to narrowly overemphasize the negative qualities of a client's life style.

Numerous alterations and revisions of the original TAT have been attempted (e.g., Bellak & Bellak, 1949; Thompson, 1949; Wolk & Wolk, 1971). All of these offshoots have been designed to make the test content more relevant to a specific target population, such as children, geriatrics, Blacks, disabled persons, etc. Though many studies maintain the superiority of the original, generic instrument, no comprehensive revision of the generalized TAT has yet been undertaken. The present project attempts to improve the comprehensive validity of the TAT method by presenting a new set of pictures which covers a wider range of human experience.

Method

Procedure

The new set of pictures was taken from the Family of Man photo essay collection published by the Museum of Modern Art (1955). Careful reading of Murray's original works (Morgan and Murray, 1935; Murray, 1938; Murray, 1943) revealed that the TAT stimulus pictures were selected arbitrarily by Murray from art works and specially commissioned drawings. The only selection "criterion" was Murray's judgment as to which pictures had the most potential for eliciting meaningful projective material. In other words, no empirical method was used in the selection of the pictures. Consequently, arbitrary criteria also were used to select the Family of

Man pictures in order to make the selection of the new pictures as similar as possible to the selection of the original TAT stimuli. The following selection criteria were used:

1. The new pictures had to show "potential for eliciting meaningful projective material" (Murray's only criterion).
2. Most (but not all) of the pictures had to include more than one human character.
3. Approximately half of the pictures had to depict humans showing "positive" affective expression (e.g., smiling, dancing, embracing, etc.).
4. Approximately half of the pictures had to depict human poses that were more active than simply standing, sitting, or lying down.

In all, 30 Family of Man pictures were selected to compare with the 30 TAT pictures (blank card number 16 was omitted). Eight volunteer subjects were enlisted from an undergraduate psychology class. Volunteers were informed that they would be asked to tell stories to a set of pictures similar to those used in a popular personality test. Each of the eight subjects (five males, three females) was given all sixty pictures over three test sessions. Twenty pictures were used for each session--10 from the TAT and 10 from the Family of Man set. The order of the cards was the same for each subject. The first card of each 20-card set was a TAT card and the second card came from the Family of Man collection. Subsequent cards alternated between the two tests. TAT cards were ordered

according to their original numbers assigned by Murray; the new cards were placed in arbitrary sequence. The three sets of 20 cards were administered in the same order across the three sessions for each subject. That is, every subject began the first session with the set starting with TAT card number one and finished the third session with the set ending with Family of Man card number 30. The procedure resulted in a total of 480 stories: 240 to the TAT pictures and 240 to the Family of Man set, which hereafter will be designated as the Southern Mississippi TAT (or SM-TAT).

Only 8 subjects were used because we were interested in differences between tests and not differences between subjects. Consequently, we tried to test a group of subjects who had many characteristics in common. The result of this subject selection was that all subjects fit the following description: 1) between the ages of 18 and 25, 2) undergraduate student, 3) no reported history of serious psychological problems, 4) no previous psychotherapy or psychiatric hospitalization, 5) caucasian, and 6) from a middle-class socioeconomic background. Statistical analyses were conducted with tests, rather than subject groups, as the independent variable.

Standard TAT instructions were used in administering the three sets of pictures. Administrations were conducted by two advanced level male graduate students.

Measures of TAT and SM-TAT Performance

The following dependent variables were used to measure the

projective story-telling performances of subjects responding to both sets of pictures.

1. Story length - The number of lines per story were counted as a measure of response productivity.
2. "Equilibrium" or "disequilibrium" story themes - Eron (1950) devised a theme classification system which dichotomized stories according to "equilibrium" or "disequilibrium" themes. "Equilibrium" themes involve conflict-free stories in which the participating characters engage in positively-toned behavior and/or interact with others in a co-operative and supportive manner. "Disequilibrium" themes involve tension-filled, conflictful stories in which the participating characters engage in negatively-toned behavior and/or interact in a disruptive or frustrating manner.
3. Interaction themes - The variable measures the primary interpersonal relationship of a story. Themes were tallied for relationships with parents, partners, peers, and siblings. An "Intrapersonal" theme was tallied when there was only one character in a story, and an "impersonal" theme was recorded when no characters were mentioned.
4. Emotional tone of the story - Zubin, Eron, and Schumer (1965) used a zero to four rating scale to classify the emotional flavor of each story's content with zero as a very negatively-toned story and four as a highly positively-toned story.

5. Emotional tone of the outcome - Each story's outcome was scored separately on the Zubin et al. scale.

6. Form level - Stories were classified in one of three categories based on the story's accuracy in reflecting the content of the stimulus picture. "Plus" form level refers to stories which accurately match the content of the stimulus picture. "Minus" form level refers to stories which show serious distortion in the perception of the stimulus picture. "Neutral" form level refers to stories which neither accurately match nor seriously distort the stimulus picture.

7. Activity level of the main character - Activity level of the central character was measured by a classification system devised by Garfield and Eron (1948). An "active" score means that the central character is having an active, self-determined effect on the situation in the story. A "passive" score means that the main character is the passive recipient of the behavior of others or of the effects of external circumstances. A "neutral" score means that the main character is neither active nor passive in his or her role in the story.

8. Identity of characters - Tallies were made for the number of males, females, and characters with sex unspecified included in the stories. Tallies also were made of the number of groups and the number of introduced characters (i.e., characters included in the story, but not pictured on the cards).

The three authors scored the stories for all scoring systems with each author scoring 160 randomly assigned stories. Prior to the scoring of the experimental protocols, the scorers practiced until they achieved inter-rater reliability of over 80% agreement between each pair of scorers for each scoring system.

Results

TAT and SM-TAT results for each variable were compared using *t* tests for dependent samples because the stories for each set were told by the same subjects. Table 1 is a summary of the mean comparisons.

Insert Table 1 here

The difference in total lines per picture set was not significant ($t = 1.46$). This indicates that there was no difference in the lengths of stories told to the two sets of pictures.

There were significantly more equilibrium (positive, cooperative) themes of stories told to SM-TAT pictures ($t = 7.40$). Correspondingly, there were significantly more disequilibrium (negative, conflictful) themes of stories told to TAT stories ($t = -7.40$). An important relationship to note is that for the SM-TAT stories, there was a balance between equilibrium ($\bar{X} = 16.4$) and disequilibrium ($\bar{X} = 13.6$) themes. For the TAT stories, the disequilibrium themes ($\bar{X} = 21.4$) far outnumbered the equilibrium themes ($\bar{X} = 8.6$).

In terms of interaction themes, the SM-TAT pictures yielded significantly more themes of peer interaction (t = -3.86). The TAT pictures elicited significantly more intrapersonal (single character) themes (t = 6.25). There were no significant differences between the two picture sets for parent, partner, sibling, and impersonal themes.

The SM-TAT stories resulted in significantly more positive emotional tone scores for both the basic stories (t = -11.65) and the story outcomes (t = -4.63). For both TAT and SM-TAT stories the emotional tone of the outcome was more positive than the emotional tone of the rest of the story.

Form level scores revealed that both picture sets yielded a large majority of plus form level stories and very few minus form level stories. The only significant difference between sets was for neutral stories with the TAT yielding the higher score (t = 3.59).

Activity level scores showed the SM-TAT eliciting stories with significantly more activity on the part of the main character (t = -6.06). There were no differences between the sets in terms of passive and neutral activity levels for the main character.

In regard to the identity of characters, the SM-TAT stories included more groups (t = -5.22). There were no differences between the two sets of pictures in the number of males, females, sex unspecified characters, or introduced characters.

Discussion

The results of the present study indicate that the SM-TAT elicits

projective material comparable in quantity and character type to the TAT. At the same time, the SM-TAT elicits more positively toned stories with greater emphasis on interpersonal rather than intrapersonal themes. Furthermore, the main characters in the SM-TAT stories are involved in more active, self-determined behavior. In other words, the SM-TAT places more emphasis on "healthy," adaptive aspects of personality adjustment.

It is important that the SM-TAT stories are not predominately positive and action-oriented. The results illustrate that the new technique provides a balance of positive and negatively toned stories and active, passive, and neutral behavior patterns of the main characters. In other words, we think we have been successful in developing a thematic apperception test that covers a more comprehensive range of human functioning. We have demonstrated that we have preserved the projective quality of the technique by showing that our new procedure elicits stories which are comparable to TAT stories in terms of length, thematic variety, and the type of characters included.

For many years, clinicians have been using the TAT, which primarily covers the conflictful, emotionally negative and behaviorally passive side of human nature. A technique which brings the subject in contact with the brighter side of human experience is a more comprehensive and fair assessment procedure for studying and describing personality characteristics. It is our expectation that the new technique will tap the healthier levels of human adjustment and will be a better measure of adaptive personality functioning. Also, we expect the SM-TAT to do a

better job at assessing the problems that certain individuals have in dealing with more positively toned and active human situations. In other words, we expect the SM-TAT to be more successful than the TAT in distinguishing adaptive, mature personality functioning from problematic, disturbed levels of adjustment. The next planned study in our development of the new technique is to compare the TAT and SM-TAT with various groups of psychiatric patients differing in severity and type of psychopathology. So far, the SM-TAT shows considerable promise as a valid and comprehensive assessment and diagnostic tool.

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Table 1

TAT and SM-TAT: Mean Comparisons

(8 subjects X 30 pictures X 2 sets = 480 stories)

Variable	TAT	SM-TAT	t-test Results (df = 7)
Total Lines	207.5	196.4	NS
Themes (per 30 stories)			
Equilibrium	8.6	16.4	$p < .001$
Disequilibrium	21.4	13.6	$p < .001$
Parent	7.9	8.8	NS
Partner	4.2	6.0	NS
Peer	3.2	5.9	$p < .01$
Sibling	0.8	1.1	NS
Intrapersonal	12.1	6.9	$p < .001$
Impersonal	1.8	1.4	NS
Emotional Tone			
Story	1.34	2.19	$p < .001$
Outcome	1.80	2.40	$p < .01$
Form Level			
Plus	25.1	27.0	NS
Minus	0.5	1.2	NS
Neutral	4.4	1.8	$p < .01$
Activity Level			
Active	9.9	13.8	$p < .001$
Passive	6.5	5.1	NS
Neutral	13.6	11.1	NS
Identity of Characters			
Male	27.2	27.1	NS
Female	22.1	24.8	NS
Sex Unspecified	5.0	8.5	NS
Groups	6.2	10.1	$p < .001$
Introduced Characters	14.8	10.0	NS